DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 362 868 CS 214 054

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TITLE Teaching Creative Writing: That Is, Teaching Something Other Than the Craft.
PUB DATE 16 Oct 93
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association (Denver, CO, October 15-16, 1993).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College English; College Students; *Creative Writing; Higher Education; *Poetry; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Composition Theory; Teaching Perspectives; Writing Development

ABSTRACT

Recent articles by August Kleinzahler, Joseph Epstein, and Diana Gioia question the value of contemporary poetry, particularly that which comes from graduate and undergraduate creative writing programs. Ron McFarland, in a recent issue of "College English," argues against these articles and advocates teaching craft as the only essential which can be taught among the five essential qualities of a serious writer, the others being desire, drive, talent, and vision. However, to focus on craft and ignore the other four essentials is to merely provide an empty artistry for arranging equally empty thoughts. Desire can be "taught" as it is encouraged by the instructor and peers; drive can be "taught" as it is stimulated in an atmosphere where a real interest in the subject of the writing is discussed, read about, written about and responded to; talent can be "taught" as all writers are encouraged to explore their own resources; and vision can be "taught" as students are led to take risks and think in new ways. Perhaps Epstein, Kleinzahler and Gioia's criticisms are well founded if teaching writing in the universities centers on the craft of writing with the focus on product, rather than teaching qualities like desire, drive and vision, with the focus on content. (NH)

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RMMLA Presentation on 10/16/93
2100 Words

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Teaching Creative Writing: That is, Teaching Something Other Than the Craft

In an environment where we find persons like August Kleinzahler, Joseph Epstein and Dana Gioia criticizing the proliferation of poor quality poetry coming from the university classrooms, perhaps it is time to consider the basis of the criticism and the reason for the poor quality of writing, if indeed it might be so. In the 1992 May issue of Harper's Magazine, Kleinzahler says, "It is fear that has neutered the avant-garde and caused its academization, not merely fear of engaging content, . . . but fear of individuality, of vision, of passion . . ."(36) The poet's passion, in Kleinzahler's estimate, is for "networking," for "scoring" by writing poems with just the "correct sentiment" (35-36). Kleinzahler says further that in our universities, teachers of these poets contribute to a poetry which is an "inflation of the material and . . . more violent than it deserves to be" (36) by "saying things like: "Did you earn that last line? or I want you to write about the most painful/humiliating/difficult experience of your life, especially if it involves family or sex. If both, extra good!" (38).

Epstein, in a 1988 article, sees contemporary poetry, as written and read in a vacuum of hundreds of university creative-

writing programs, "off in the direction of the lyric" (19). These programs are "producing more people who think of themselves as poets than this or any other country needs, but [who], through the encouraging, the somewhat therapeutic, atmosphere of the workshop, [are also] generally lowering the high standard of work which is poetry's only serious claim on anyone's attention" (17). Gioia in a 1991 Atlantic Monthly article states that "for most newspapers and magazines, poetry has become a literary commodity intended less to be read than to be noted with approval" (96). Though supported in the rarified vacuum of creative-writing programs, where "most readings are celebrations less of poetry than of the author's ego," Gioia thinks "poetry has lost the confidence that it speaks to and for the general culture" (97). It would further seem that poetry, due to its association with academia, has perhaps become more of a product, capitalistic in nature, produced for purposes of prosperity within the academic work world. What indeed has become of poetry as art? The many literary journals and presses seem now to be little more than the competitive forum for which poets write to attain profession validation as writing teachers.

Okay, so we find the poets, some of them ourselves, in these university settings either studying to be poets or teaching aspiring student poets. What can be done to move poetry back out to the world where a poem might be taken as a work of art rather than as isolated, meaningless language or just another line of publishing credit on the curriculum vita?

After arguing against these recent articles, which question the value of contemporary poetry, particularly that which seems to be coming from the many graduate and undergraduate creative writing programs, Ron McFarland in a 1993 issue of College English settles into a favorite figure of speech, a sports metaphor, comparing poetry with baseball. He thinks that poetry needs all the little undergraduate and graduate programs just like baseball needs the little league and the minor leagues before either of the two can expect to produce the stars of the big time. Well, this is all very boring, and who cares anyway until McFarland finally comes to laying out his five essential qualities of a serious writer: DESIRE, DRIVE, TALENT, VISION and CRAFT. I can't disagree with this, and if I were to look at any great writer, Shakespeare to Roethke, I can't but imagine that these qualities would be present. The problem comes, however, when McFarland decides that CRAFT is the only essential of the five that can be taught and then proceeds to show examples of just how he teaches CRAFT to two of his students. He sounds, of course, just like the old grammar school teacher who said and still says, "I can't teach writing, but I can teach these unworthy brats grammar and punctuation and spelling, and, by god, I will. Just sharpen my red pencil, and LISTEN TO ME."

I think McFarland is wrong; I think that three of the other essentials can be taught. But first of all I want to say that I think that teaching CRAFT is the least important, the very least, unless the CRAFT is that of formal poetry which, when properly

used, becomes more a tool or means of generation than an empty artistry for arranging equally empty thoughts. Craft, as taught by McFarland and others like him, is like teaching a student to write a five paragraph theme. The results may look like an essay or a poem, but are void of meaning for any reader other than the intimate communication between the teacher, teaching his or her idea of poetic craft, and the student, writing to please the teacher and, hopefully, earn an A. By focusing on craft, which is really a set of semi-rules that may or may not have worked for other creative writers, it would seem that teachers of creative writing courses are doing little more than teaching in a manner similar to the current traditional methods still used by far too many universities for teaching compulsory courses of English composition.

But now, on to the other four qualities, three of which I believe can be taught: desire, drive and vision. McFarland says, "one can stimulate desire or drive or even vision, but one cannot teach those essentials" (34). I agree, that yes, you can stimulate these essentials, but if one doesn't learn from situations of positive stimulation, then I'm not sure I know what teaching is exactly. Our whole system of teaching and evaluation is somehow teetering on this basic theory, isn't it? Teacher stimulates the student to write well, and student responds, and student is rewarded.

So now, my proposal: stimulate desire, stimulate drive, ignore talent, and stimulate vision.

DESIRE: If a student finds herself in a poetry class at the university, at any level, there is a good chance that she has some desire to write. So am I to ignore her desire, because McFarland says it can't be taught? No. I'm going to grab hold of her faint desire, and I'm going to make her get a taste of what it's like to be listened to, to have someone, myself and her peers, really care about what she has to write about. And there goes her desire. It's out of control, and no one can stop her once she gets an idea that what she has to say is important. That is desire, and I can teach that, even to those who enter the first day of first-year writing with their heads so low that they dare not look me in the eye because, some guy like McFarland has been drilling them on craft or grammar or spelling or whatever nonsense he himself feels comfortable with.

DRIVE: This is closely associated with desire. If the writer has the desire, the drive comes right along, but as a teacher I can stimulate this also. Drive has to do with the urgency of the desire, and if I can create some natural momentum in my classroom, I think I'm teaching drive. I don't rely on students' interest in me and what I have to say about their work to create this momentum; I give this over to the students themselves. If I can create an atmosphere where a real interest in the subject of the writing can be discussed, read about, written about and responded to, the individuals in the classroom will take over as they explore and test their individual ideas. I can put a bit of an edge on this drive by publishing individual

works each class period, by keeping the class rolling at a speed just a little more than comfortable, and by making each class period a reward for the extra effort expended. If a person has ideas and has experienced that there are those of his or her peers who are interested, and that the situation can be repeated over and over and over, there it goes, the DRIVE. It's out of control too.

TALENT: No I can't teach talent, but I can downplay it, even ignore it, because I believe it is a most devastating element in the classroom, causing many writers to give up, often before knowing whether they have IT or not. It is too easy for a teacher to focus on the "talented one" and make him or her the example. And what happens to the rest of the class? They all sit around in awe, just as we all sit around in awe at all the spectator sports we are so very good at promoting and supporting. The "untalented" writers begin hiding their work. There is no desire, no drive. Oh, but we have craft, don't we. The "untalented" writer can always work on her craft, and when that doesn't get her out into the ballpark, she can blame her lack of success on poor craft, or on poor teaching. But let's not let that happen in our classrooms. Rather let's get on to teaching vision.

VISION: Now this is perhaps the most interesting of the essentials McFarland ignores in his teaching. He says age and experience can bring vision to the work. Well since most of our poor undergraduates are just 17 and 18 and 19, what are they

going to do? Well, I know what they're going to do in the courses I teach: they're going to start thinking. Poetry is not some string of words that comes as a gift to the page in front of a poet, like they did for McFarland's student, who just so simply wrote out her experience of near-drowning. Poetry or prose of any value is writing that is concerned with and struggles with significance and thought. Thought and meaning that come from exploration, from self-involvement, from curiosity, from taking a risk to think in a NEW way. McFarland's student, Ann D., could have written a powerful poem if she had used the material of her "experience" (which she does have, even thought she's only 17 or 18). She could have usee her experience as a basis for an exploration, rather than for raw material to be subjected to McFarland's application of craft: word choice here, enjambment there, metaphor wherever, and nonsense everywhere.

Perhaps Epstein, Kleinzahler and Gioia's criticisms are indeed well founded if writing, as taught in our universities, centers on the craft of writing as it seems to be in McFarland's classroom. Perhaps poetry, as product of hundreds of writing workshops in our universities where the focus is on craft, is little more than a commodity produced for personal advancement. In the teaching of craft, the focus is on product, while in the teaching of qualities like desire, drive and vision, the focus is on content. My understanding of poetry is that of a form of art, and my understanding of art is that of form full of meaningful content. Perhaps this is the world-out-there's vision of what

poetry is also. Perhaps by following my briefly stated theory and practice, some of our students' writing might approach art as dynamic container of new meaning rather than art as sterile poetic object.

And now "A Digression" by Richard Wilbur from a recent New Yorker.

Having confided to the heavy-lipped
Mailbox his great synoptic manuscript,
He stands light-headed in the lingering clang.
How lightly, too, he feels his briefcase hang!

And now it swings beside his knees, as they
From habit start him on his evening way,
With the tranced rhythm of a metronome,
Past hall and grove and stadium toward his home.

Yet as the sun-bathed campus slips behind,
A giddy lack of purpose fills his mind,
Making him swerve into a street which for
Two decades he has managed to ignore.

What stops him in his tracks is that his soul,
Proposing nothing, innocent of goal,
Sees no perspective dwindling on between
Gold-numbered doors and frontages of green

But for the moment an obstructive storm
Of specks and flashes that will take no form,
A roiled mosaic or a teeming scrim
That seems to have no pertinence to him.

It is his purpose now as, turning round,
He takes his bearings and is homeward bound,
To ponder what the world's confusion meant
When he regarded it without intent (68).

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